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I'm a Student, I'm a Tutor, I'm Confused!: Peer Tutor and Classroom Student

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by **Jennifer Kimball**, *University of Missouri—Columbia*

Performing two roles makes undergraduates better tutors and better students



Jennifer Kimball

Writing centers that employ undergraduates offer the tutors invaluable experiences, and the undergraduate tutors bring a distinctive perspective and skill set to their work. Indeed, undergraduate peer tutors are in a unique position: as we work with writers to decipher instructor comments we may suddenly realize why “awk” was scribbled in the margins of our own papers; as we are writing a 10-12 page paper we may suddenly discover a new way to tackle paper organization with a tutee. Although all writing consultants wear many hats as diagnosticians, audience members, devil’s advocates, and guides, being an undergraduate adds another layer that influences the way peer tutors wear these other hats. Like other undergraduate tutors, my experiences in the classroom shape my abilities as a peer tutor and my experiences as a tutor impact my class work by providing me with useful tools and inspiration.

As a peer tutor I do not gain my authority from years of post-graduate education or experience teaching writing. Instead I offer student writers the chance to talk about their writing with someone who is going through the same education process at the same time. Though we may come from different majors, graduating classes, or writing experiences, we’re both navigating the same murky waters of midterms, group projects, part-time jobs, homesickness, and huge reading loads. Having an opportunity to chat about an awful Spanish test for a few minutes with someone who is also enduring a round of tests can help the writer relax and focus before diving into the tutorial. A freshman I

tutored explained that her conclusion summarized the paper because in high school her teachers wanted reiterative conclusions, and she was having difficulty learning to change her conclusion style when necessary. Having a chance to commiserate with tutors who had also recently made the jump from high school to college showed her that it is absolutely normal to find the transition challenging.

Undergraduate tutors and writing centers have a mutually beneficial relationship[.]

Aside from serving as a common ground, our shared student perspective can provide insight into where the writer's process breaks down. Since I'm not "the expert" or an authority figure, writers may feel freer to express their concerns and questions. One writer I worked with was extremely anxious about his paper, despite the solid analysis and rigorous style that made the paper a pleasure to read. As we talked about the paper he explained that he normally struggles in English classes and that he was nervous because he had expected me to judge his writing. However, since I was clearly a peer he felt more comfortable discussing his writing. Another student appeared to have trouble organizing the ideas in her paper. As we talked about the problem, we discovered she had trouble taking lecture notes. Her classroom difficulties hampered her ability to write, so we chatted about different note-taking strategies. Study and research habits shape students' abilities to write, and peer tutors can use their immediate, first-hand perspective as classroom students to effectively help writers.

Simply taking classes influences my tutoring and provides me with a host of ideas for tutorials. One of my favorite teachers would periodically assign in-class writing. Normally these were simple one-page assignments designed to help us focus our ideas and connect class readings. Later, when I started the major class assignments, these exercises were invaluable. As a tutor, I use these prompts to help writers create exercises to focus their own papers. Studying a foreign language has given me a glimpse of what ESL students go through and has made me appreciate the importance of negotiating in ESL tutorials. I know from first-hand experience that simply being told the correct way to say something doesn't help me learn the grammar concept. Moreover, studying another language has refined my proofreading skills and has suggested ways to help other writers learn to proof their own papers. Classroom discussions about the soundness of an author's argument or the effectiveness of an author's prose show me ways to critically and constructively talk about a paper without lapsing into "fix-it" mode. Taking a range of classes also helps me appreciate the writing conventions of a variety of disciplines. While all of these benefits are probably intentional, perhaps are even the reason behind peer tutoring, it still amazes me how classes from statistics to art history contribute to my skills as a writing tutor.

The variety of writing processes and thinking processes that peer writing tutors see offers a chance to reconsider our own methods as students.

Writing tutoring appears to be a two-way street, since working as a writing consultant has improved my abilities as a student. My work as a writing consultant has helped me assemble a tool kit of useful strategies for tackling my own writing assignments. Now when I find myself getting stuck trying to solidify my thesis I often write an impromptu dialogue between myself as a

tutor and myself as a tutee. After experiencing as a reader the awkwardness of quotations that are dropped into papers without explanations, I weave outside voices more tightly into my papers and consider my audience more. Talking about ideas one-on-one with fellow students has boosted my confidence in contributing to in-class discussions. Hearing a range of papers with a range of viewpoints has encouraged me to make more nuanced comments in class. Though I don't look forward to working with students who have to turn their paper in the day of the tutorial, I've learned an incredible amount about prioritizing. When I have essay examinations I can use this new skill to write a solid, cohesive essay with an even tighter deadline.

The variety of writing processes and thinking processes that peer writing tutors see offers a chance to reconsider our own methods as students. Though I may not change my own writing process, seeing other writers in the throes of writing and thinking does influence the ways I tackle my life in the classroom. One writer's method for organizing and synthesizing research notes has inspired me to experiment with how I study for tests. Though one student I worked with struggles with writing, knowing that he excelled at science showed me ways to think about my chemistry class, since seeing how he organized information gave me ideas for how to organize my notes. Before I worked with him I tended to think too abstractly, but his writing process was linear and almost inductive. This rhetorical strategy proved useful for understanding my other coursework.

Undergraduate tutors and writing centers have a mutually beneficial relationship: writing centers offer peer tutors a variety of experiences that can aid their development as students, and undergraduate tutors bring a useful dynamic to the writing center from their experiences in the classroom. Consciously reflecting on the connections between tutoring strategies and student strategies has encouraged me to be more active in cross-referencing these two aspects of my life. While peer writing consultants may be in an odd place, we're also in an ideal place to use our experiences to improve our abilities in the writing center and classroom.

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